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WIND FARM DEVELOPER UNVEILS PLANS

By Karl Puckett

Back in the early 1980s, commercial wind turbines — with their blades pushed to supersonic speeds — exploded near Livingston, creating a 600-foot-long debris trail along Interstate 90.

"We were going to show Montanans what was then state-of-art technology in operation," Van Jamison said.

Wind technology has come a long way since then, and so has Jamison, who at that time headed the state Energy Division within the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, which put up the four turbines.

Today, developers are erecting high-tech wind towers from Ethridge to Judith Gap, each capable of churning out enough electricity to supply 250 homes while withstanding the state's fierce wind.

Instead of overseeing the state's testing of developing technology, Jamison is now a key figure in private commercial wind development, but his no-nonsense view of the industry has remained as constant as the state's wind.

"It's a way for rural Montanans to reach into the pockets of rich Californians and bring home the money," he said.

Gaelectric, an international renewable energy company with ambitious plans in Montana, including wind farms near Havre and Fort Benton, has opened an office on Central Avenue in Great Falls to serve as its exploration base. It recently announced the hiring of Jamison as its vice president of strategic operations for North America.

"He will play a key role in strategizing our asset base across Montana and the Northwest," said Eamonn McGrath, president of Gaelectric North America Inc.

The job is the latest chapter in the 60-year-old Jamison's long career, in which he watched the state's wind industry progress from exploding turbines to exploding interest in development.

Illinois-based Invenergy opened the 135-megawatt Judith Gap plant in 2006. Then last fall, Spain-based NaturEner completed the first phase of a 210-megawatt wind farm south of Ethridge and north of Great Falls. Texas-based Horizon Energy is planning a phased 18,000-acre facility near Martinsdale, a project Jamison helped put together before joining Gaelectric.

"It's pretty obvious Montana has been found," Jamison said over the whistling wind at Gaelectric's Frenchman's Ridge site outside of Fort Benton.

Gaelectric is in various stages of developing wind farms near Fort Benton, Havre, Billings and Harlowton. If they're built, the wind farms could produce a combined 951 megawatts of electricity. The company also is exploring construction of a plant where wind energy would be stored in the ground (see sidebar).

It's an ambitious agenda, Jamison said, adding Gaelectric will need partners to complete it. But he notes that the company wouldn't be in Montana if the market wasn't attractive.

"The way you can tell if it's promising or not is we're still here," Jamison said as a lone anemometer situated in a farm field collects wind speeds behind him.

Jamison said the sale of wind-powered electricity to out-of-state buyers will bring benefits in return, including increases in property taxes, wages and lease revenue for landowners.

He laments what he said is the state's "export allergy," a tendency to skeptically view out-of-state shipments of electricity even as beef and grain are routinely exported.

He's a supporter of state Senate Bill 360, which would allow capacity to be increased within existing transmission rights-of-way without environmental review. The bill would lead to more renewable power being shipped to other states, he said.

Jamison said he's a practical cheerleader of the industry, realizing that just because developers are exploring Montana doesn't mean wind farms will get built.

"Even after you do due diligence, you may end up with a dry hole," he said, comparing the business to oil and gas exploration.

At this stage, he views the sites where Gaelectric is exploring wind potential simply as "locations."

In any legitimate project, wind speeds must be tested for at least a year — preferably three years —in order to get financing, he said.

"It's an incredibly competitive business and the margins are very small," Jamison said.

Differences of 1 to 2 mph in average annual wind speed can make or break a project, which he said typically cost $2 million per megawatt, putting the price tag of a 250-megawatt wind farm at about $500 million.

Before joining Gaelectric, Jamison was the founder and president of POWAIR, Inc., a wind development consulting company.

He's worked on renewable energy issues for the U.S. Department of Energy, and, from 1983 to 1996, served as administrator of the old DNRC Energy Division.

Under Jamison's watch, The energy office erected the 25-kilowatt turbines near Livingston as a demonstration project, figuring the area's notorious wind would serve as an acid test of the equipment.

Jamison credits the lesson of the exploding turbines and others learned along the way for technical advancements that are leading to successful projects today. For example, it would take 60 of the old Livingston test towers to produce the same amount of power as a single 1.5-megawatt turbine at Judith Gap.

"It's the mistakes that are raw material for improvements," Jamison said.